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Dragon Myths and Biblical Theology

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Abstract
A recurrent myth in the Bible about God "slaying a dragon," primarily in the Old Testament, provides a test case for using the "study of Scripture as the soul of theology" without depending on historical accuracy or indeed on "salvation history" at all. Freeing us from the dangers of a resurgent focus on history in theological interpretation, this article shows how the dragon-slaying myth speaks powerfully to theodicy and the problem of evil.

Keywords
biblical theology, *Chaoskampf*, dragons, *Heilsgeschichte*, hermeneutics, Leviathan, myth, revelation, salvation history, theodicy

The teen Bible study my parish used to sponsor advertised being built on "The 'big picture' of salvation history." It "lays out the story of salvation history" and helps participants "go deep into each period of salvation history and discover the amazing story woven throughout all of Scripture." A quick internet search for the term "salvation history" will find Catholic books, film series, timelines, RCIA programs, websites, and countless parish Bible studies proliferating across the country. As a biblical scholar deeply committed to bringing the fruits of scholarship to the church and the lay faithful, emphases like the ones I just quoted worry me, and they worry me because we have been down this road before. In this article I address this concern and offer an alternative approach, suggesting that a serious appropriation of

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the Near Eastern mythology in the Bible is key to a more complex understanding of God and of theodicy, and what is meant by the saving work of Christ.

Heilsgeschichte and the Collapse of History

A focus on salvation history such as one finds in Catholic catechesis today sounds very much like the *Heilsgeschichte* movement of the 1960s. Associated especially with G. Ernest Wright, this movement held that the way to bring theological insight from academic study of the Scriptures was to focus on Salvation History.[1] God had acted in Israel's history, and those "mighty acts" were the locus of revelation.[2] That is, the history described in the text, penned by the inspired community, *is* the revelation—revelation was not in the "story of faith" but the actual events themselves.[3] For this movement, what was needed was a "theology of recital," working progressively in stages. History has a meaning, while, as Wright wrote, "the Bible is thus not primarily the Word of God, but the record of the Acts of God."

Although Protestant biblical scholars were in the forefront of the Biblical Theology Movement, Catholic exegetes and theologians were numerous, too. Pierre Benôit and John McKenzie waxed eloquently about the *Heilsgeschichte*, and Jean Daniélou stated, "the Bible exists simply for the purpose of describing the *Magnalia Dei*: from Genesis to Revelation, it is nothing but a chronicle of these privileged events."[4]

There was much of value in this model. Instead of treating the final and terminal editor as the only inspired author or "distributing the charism, so to speak, among the various men who contributed to the book," it made all the sources and redactors heirs of a faith and a tradition that preceded them all.[5] It allowed for a unity of the Old and New Testaments based on "one divine action running through one history."[6] This model became very influential in the Second Vatican Council,[7] and *Dei Verbum* adopted the idea that revelation consists especially in the acts of God, relegating the words to "proclaiming the works" (*Dei Verbum*, 2).[8] Articles 3–4 and 14 each

1. Charles H. Giblin, "As It Is Written … A Basic Problem in Neomatics," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20 (1958): 329.
2. G. Ernest Wright, "Neo-Orthodoxy and the Bible," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 14.2 (1946): 88, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/xiv.2.87; G. Ernest Wright, "The Terminology of Old Testament Religion and Its Significance," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1942): 413, https://doi.org/10.1086/370657.
3. Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible As Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 25.
4. Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meanings of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie (Cleveland: World, 1968), 149; cf. 157, 159, 165–67.
5. John L. McKenzie, *Myths and Realities: Studies in Biblical Theology* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963), 62–63.
6. Floyd V. Filson, *The New Testament against Its Environment: The Gospel of Christ the Risen Lord*, Studies in Biblical Theology 3 (London: SCM, 1950), 64.
7. John T. Ford, "Theological Themes: Theology of Revelation," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 159 (1968): 166.
8. Thomas Norris, "On Revisiting *Dei Verbum*," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 66 (2001): 317–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/002114000106600403.

contained overviews of the stages of Salvation History. "Never before in a Church document," wrote Joan Gormley, "had events (deeds, works) been considered alongside words as an integral part of revelation."[9]

The Biblical Theology Movement died dramatically in the 1960s and 70s. James Barr and Brevard Childs have been credited with its demise, but a host of biblical scholars shared their insights.[10] It was important to the Movement that the *Magnalia Dei*, God's acts in history, really happened.[11] What if historical evidence is contrary to the historicity of the events? The landslide of sites and artifacts found in the ancient Near East in the last half of the twentieth century quickly eroded confidence in finding and recovering historical confirmation of Israel's narratives. It became what Leo Perdue called "the collapse of history."[12]

First, Thomas Thompson and John Van Seters reconsidered all evidence for the historicity of Abraham and the Genesis patriarchs and pointed out that, "Not only has archaeology not proven a single event of the patriarchal traditions to be historical, it has not shown any of the traditions to be likely."[13] Since the appearance of these two works, the entire concept of a historical patriarchal period has been abandoned. The most conservative assessment would be that it is not possible to establish a historical framework that is so exclusive that the patriarchs must necessarily belong within it.[14]

The Exodus and Conquest fared little better. By the 1980s most Egyptologists and many biblical archaeologists recognized the Exodus account was not only fraught with

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9. Joan F. Gormley, *Commentary on Dei Verbum* (Paeonian Springs: Catholic Home Study Institute, 1994), 9.
10. James Barr, "Revelation through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation* 17 (1963): 193–205; *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), https://doi.org/10.1177/002096436301700207; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 13–96; also influential in the demise were Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 194–205, https://doi.org/10.1086/485346; and B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel*, Horae Soderblomianae 5 (Lund: Gleerup, 1967).
11. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), esp. essays 15, 19; Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (London: SCM, 1952), 117, 123–24.
12. Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Prosper Grech, "Further Reflections on Biblical Inspiration and Truth," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42 (2012): 88, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107912441306.
13. Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 328.
14. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 129–30.

historical inaccuracies but that it was difficult to point to more than a handful of "accuracies."[15] As for the Conquest, William Dever—the most renowned American biblical archaeologist alive today and himself now the champion of biblical historicity against the so-called "Minimalists"[16]—put it bluntly: "There isn't a single reputable professional archaeologist in the world who espouses the conquest model in Israel, Europe or America. We don't need to say any more about the conquest model. That's that."[17] "It simply did not happen; the archaeological evidence is indisputable."[18] The current locus of debate over historicity is the united monarchy of David and Solomon. The archaeology of 1000–800 BCE has been daily news in the biblical blogosphere for a decade, with archaeologists and biblical scholars arrayed between "Minimalists" and "Maximalists" over the history of these narratives.[19]

I present this "news from the field" not because I conclude the biblical narratives in question are fictitious or bear no connection to actual history. I do not hold either of those views and have written so extensively.[20] I present this to highlight the danger of basing the theological importance of the Old Testament solely on its history, on its status as a record of God's saving acts.[21]

But there were other problems with the Salvation History/Biblical Theology Movement. Most immediately, the Salvation History model fails to deal with non-narrative material like the Old Testament Wisdom Literature.[22] Second, as Mark Smith writes, "The Bible does not proclaim history as the only or even the main factor of

15. Donald Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. pp. xx–xx and xx–xx; Ernest Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko, eds., *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997).
16. William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites, and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), ix, 227; *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 258.
17. William G. Dever, "How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite," in *The Rise of Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), 29.
18. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites*, 227–28.
19. Hershel Shanks, "In This Corner: William Dever and Israel Finkelstein Debate the Early History of Israel," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 30 (2004): 42–45; Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating the Archeology and the History of Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmitt, Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies 17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).
20. Robert D. Miller II, "Yahweh and His Clio: Critical Theory and the Historical Criticism of the Hebrew Bible," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4 (2005): 145–65, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993x06059007; "How Post-Modernism (and W. F. Albright) Can Save Us from Malarkey," *Bible and Interpretation* (December 2003), http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Miller_Malarkey.shtml.
21. Ferdinand Deist, "The Problem of History in Old Testament Theology," *Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suider-Afrika* 24 (1981): 23.
22. Walter Brueggemann, "The Triumphalist Tendency in Exegetical History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38 (1970): 368, 371, 375, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/xxxviii.4.367; Gary Dorrien, *The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 151; Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 63.

revelation."[23] Third, since "Concrete history is never revelation history pure and simple," someone must interpret the history.[24] Finally, as Morton Smith wrote, "Clearly the defense of biblical history as a revelation of the ways and nature of God cannot well be pursued except by the many who are ignorant of the Bible and the few who know what it says but have been so thoroughly brainwashed that they read and revere it without thinking of what it means."[25]

Let me suggest that a return of *Heilsgeschichte* in the twenty-first-century church owes much to the fact that "History has been and is the dominant … mode of perceiving experience, searching for the 'real,' and structuring the self in the West."[26] I agree with the call years ago of W. Taylor Stevenson, "that we cease to reifying history as a self-explanatory and self-evidently true and supremely privileged form of knowledge."[27]

Myth as Revelation

There are many alternatives to the *Heilsgeschichte* model of biblical theology, and I have discussed these elsewhere. I want to echo Stevenson's plea that, "*Myth* understood or believed *as* myth can … be taken in all seriousness, be recognized as an important source of truth, and even be accepted as articulating for an individual or community an ultimate worldview or faith stance."[28] I will provide a test case of biblical theology from myth, and in the process, I will make some programmatic statements about the nature of our field.[29]

But before proceeding, let me be clear of two things I am not arguing. I am not arguing that the Bible *is* myth, that there is no history in it. Nor am I arguing that

23. Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004), 165.
24. Karl Rahner, "Observations on the Concept of Revelation," in *Revelation and Tradition*, trans. W.J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 17; Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948), 38, saw this problem long before Barr and Childs.
25. Morton Smith, "William Robertson Smith," in *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered: The Proceedings to the First Oldfather Conference, Held on the Campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, April 27–30, 1989*, ed. William M. Calder III, Illinois Classical Studies Supplement 2/Illinois Studies in the History of Classical Scholarship 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 257.
26. W. Taylor Stevenson, "Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness," in *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*, ed. L. W. Gibbs and W. T. Stevenson (Missoula: Scholars 1975), 2.
27. Stevenson, "Myth," 12.
28. Stevenson, "Myth," 13; italics original. He defines "taken as myth" as "linguistic event, as cosmogenic or world-shaping, as exploratory, etc."
29. On the definition of myth and the appropriateness of using this term, see Robert D. Miller II, "Myth as Revelation," *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 70 (2014): 539–61, https://doi.org/10.7202/1032791ar.

history is irrelevant as a category for the Bible's theological interpretation. We need history. In his Preface to *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Pope John Paul II said, "The Church of Christ takes the realism of the incarnation seriously, and this is why she attaches great importance to the 'historical-critical' study of the Bible."[30] Christianity is a historical faith. The Nicene Creed is a historical narrative.[31] "There is no doubt that … historical symbols … will continue to be normative in the theologizing of the Church," writes Walter Brueggemann, but, he continues, "These are not the only symbols in Scripture."[32]

I want to restore the role W. M. L. DeWette two centuries ago saw myth playing in shaping and ordering the biblical world.[33] *Myth* is humanity's social experience objectified. Myths address sociopolitical, psychological, and moral-pedagogical ends,[34] both in their original contexts and in the power they retain, even when far removed from original contexts.[35] And it is precisely the iconic element of myth, rather than the narrative, that gives myths this power, since the primary function of myth is evocation.[36] The twentieth-century philosopher Karl Jaspers affirmed the value of myths as loci in which one can "encounter the essentially real."[37] Franz Rosenzweig saw myth as—in Rivka Horwitz's words—"the truth itself reduced to its elements."[38] As a dramatic representation, the mythic image creates an "existential arena" wherein we encounter truth.[39] Biblical myth, then, serves not mainly to communicate information but to engage us; it does not communicate elements of faith as much as it embodies the faith.[40]

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30. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 17.
31. Of course, "We do not believe in a creed: we believe through a creed." See Gerald Vann, *Myth, Symbol, and Revelation* (Washington: The Thomist, 1962), 5.
32. Brueggemann, "Triumphalist Tendency," 378.
33. Mark S. Gignilliat, *A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 43.
34. David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 180; Armindo dos Santos Vaz, "Genèse 2–3," in *Mythe et Philosophie: Les Traditions Bibliques*, ed. Christian Berner and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 182–83.
35. Brown, *Tradition*, 178.
36. Juan Guillén Torralba, "Revelación y Mito en el Antiguo Testamento," in *Revelación y Pensar Mítico* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1970), 169.
37. Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, from *Von der Wahrheit*, trans. Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel (New York: Twayne, 1959), 56.
38. Rivka Horwitz, "From Hegelianism to a Revolutionary Understanding of Judaism: Franz Rosenzweig's Attitude toward Kabbala and Myth," *Modern Judaism* 26 (2006): 31, 40, https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/kjj003.
39. Jerry Gill, *Faith in Dialogue: A Christian Apologetic* (Waco: Jarrell, 1985), 126; Christian Berner, "Mythe et philosophie: de l'exégèse biblique à l'herméneutique philosophique," in *Mythe et Philosophie: Les Traditions Bibliques*, ed. Christian Berner and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 264.
40. Gill, *Faith*, 124–26, drawing on the later Wittgenstein; Vaz, "Genèse 2–3," 183.

God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea

Take, for example, the Old Testament myth of God, depicted as a storm, slaying a dragon, a dragon who represents chaos and is identified with the sea. In Psalm 74,

> O God, my King from of old,
> Who brings deliverance throughout the land
> It was You who drove back the sea with Your might
> Who smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters
> It was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan,
> Who left him as food for the denizens of the desert

Or Isaiah 27,

> In that day the LORD will punish
> With His great, cruel, mighty sword
> Leviathan the Elusive Serpent
> Leviathan the Twisting Serpent;
> He will slay the dragon of the sea.

And Isaiah 51,

> Awake, awake, clothe yourself with splendor.
> O arm of the LORD!
> Awake as in days of old,
> As in former ages!
> It was you that hacked Rabab to pieces,
> That pierced the Dragon.
> It was you that dried up the Sea,
> The waters of the great deep.

I have elsewhere traced the origins of this myth back through Ugaritic antecedents, the *Enuma Elish*, Hurrian and Hittite antecedents of Ugarit, and back into most ancient Proto-Indo-European mythology.[41] I have done this because, as Laurence Coupe writes, "We can see the Bible itself as a body of mythology which does two things. It develops in response to other mythologies; yet it reworks its own myths as it expands,

41. Robert D. Miller II, "Tracking the Dragon across the Ancient Near East," *Archiv Orientální* 82 (2014): 225–45.

providing further material for post-Biblical mythology."[42] As Peter Machinist writes, "To understand the meaning of a text, its language and motifs, is to understand first where they came from. It is not enough, indeed it is misleading, to focus simply on the individual text alone, as though it were a completely independent, free creation of its author. The text must rather be seen as one link in a complex chain of tradition,"[43] responding to and reworking extrabiblical myths and reworking its own myths. In that sense, the "continual re-readings and multiple reinterpretations"[44] have a history, although not so much a Salvation History, a *Heilsgeschichte*, as a *Traditionsgeschichte*.[45]

A full biblical theology of this myth would follow this traditions-history, the "'trails' or 'lines' within Scripture,"[46] through the Old Testament and into the New, with its dragon in Revelation and also Jesus trampling the Sea in the Gospels. This does not mean, however, that each Old Testament manifestation of the myth is merely read in the light of the New Testament, nor even that the New Testament manifestations are the ultimate evocations of the myth. Rather, Christians who read the Old Testament knowing the New see a convergence on Christ not evident without such knowledge.[47] The convergence is not imposed by the Christian observer, it is just only fully visible in hindsight, from the right angle, but it was all the while "in the process of becoming [that] towards which it was steering from the very beginning," to quote Hermann Gunkel.[48]

This will be clearer employing the analogy of a gun proposed by the South African scholar, Klaus Nürnberger.[49] He proposes envisioning a single packet of information, ideas, or a mythic constellation like the dragon-slaying that moves forward in time through a traditions-history of successive reinterpretation under the influence of the Spirit as a bullet. The Scriptures are the barrel of the gun—Nürnberger at first envisions a rifle, but then changes to a shotgun for reasons to be made clear momentarily. The target, perhaps a deer in this metaphor, is contemporary theological relevance. The purpose of the canon, symbolized by the gun barrel, is to give definitive direction to the thrust of the bullet towards the deer. In other words, canon gives definitive interpretive direction

42. Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 100.
43. Peter B. Machinist, Introduction to *Creation and Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), xviii.
44. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture: The Word That Comes from God and Speaks of God for the Salvation of the World*, trans. Thomas Esposito and Stephen Gregg (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2014), 58, par. 56.
45. Klaus Nürnberger, *Theology of the Biblical Witness: An Evolutionary Approach*, Theologie: Forschung und Wissenschaft 5 (Münster: Lit, 2002); Klaus Nürnberger, "On Biblical Interpretation: Evolutionary Hermeneutics—A Position Paper" (2006): 4–10, www.klaus-nurnberger.com/component/banners/click/13.html.
46. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture*, 58, par. 56.
47. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 6.403–404, 408.
48. Hermann Gunkel, *Water for a Thirsty Land: Israelite Literature and Religion*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 26.
49. Nürnberger, *Theology of the Biblical Witness*, 115–16; Klaus Nürnberger, *Biblical Theology in Outline: The Vitality of the Word of God* (Pietermaritzburg and Pretoria: Cluster Publications and the C.B. Powell Bible Centre, 2004), 65–66.

to what the Scriptures mean. The barrel of the gun is strictly limited in length; just so, the biblical canon is closed and definitive. The canon does not mark a definitive meaning of the inspired message of the text, but it has marked out a set of stages in the evolutionary history of the message and declared it to be the source and criterion for the direction of the meaning in all subsequent stages of interpretation.

For Christian theological interpretation, therefore, the barrel of the gun includes both Old and New Testaments. Jewish theological interpretation, however, could legitimately go forward without the New Testament, without the last section of our barrel, so to speak. At the same time, as Nürnberger points out, the Christian post-biblical tradition is itself diffuse, and so a shotgun makes a better analogy than a rifle. Although the canon dictates a trajectory for the Word of God, there is more than one trajectory within that delimited shot spread. Thus, there are multiple legitimate post-biblical theological interpretations, although the spread of a shotgun is what is called "Gaussian," with a higher density in the center that tapers off at the edges, so it is possible to consider some interpretations more viable than others.

The necessity of such evolution is theological and psychological. The reading community—in this case the believing community—is evolving in our apprehension of revelation. In his doctoral thesis on Bonaventure, Joseph Ratzinger describes revelation as referring "to that imageless unveiling of the divine reality."[50] Bonaventure presents this in his *Itinerarium* but derives it from Richard of St. Victor, who in his *Benjamin Minor* 79 times speaks of a progressing, evolving attentiveness and understanding of revelation as part of spiritual growth.[51] This Bonaventurian thought is picked up by Duns Scotus, whose emphasis on haecceity requires that since revelation is aimed at each human person in their unique cultural background and history, revelation is reheard, understood anew, and reinterpreted by every individual characteristic culture and historical phase again and again.[52]

Where does this leave the extrabiblical myths at the start of this trajectory—the dragon-slaying of Ugarit and Mesopotamia? Mark Smith has offered the term "Pre-Revelation" for such material.[53] But does this reduce the Bible to an assortment of

50. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1971), 59.
51. Clare Kirchberger, trans., *Selected Writings on Contemplation: Richard of St. Victor* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 41–44; Richard of St. Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs; The Mystical Arc; Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Grover Zinn (New York: Paulist, 1979), 20–21. I am grateful to Regis Armstrong for the insights of this paragraph.
52. Johannes Freyer, "The Theology of Duns Scotus," in *A Pilgrimage through the Intellectual Franciscan Tradition*, ed. A. Cirino and J. Raischl (Phoenix: Tau, 2013), 140.
53. Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 114; see also Frank J. Matera, "Biblical Authority and the Scandal of the Incarnation," in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 100.

reused mythemes, of *disjecta membra*, as C. S. Lewis argued?[54] As Daniélou wrote, "Simone Weil's mistake was to try to assimilate the gallows on which Christ hung to the cosmic pillar of Indian mythology. In this way she reduced the Christian event to unqualified religiosity."[55] And yet I want to link the Cross with Marduk's Esagil. The second-century *Acts and Martyrdom of Andrew* (14) makes this clear:

> I know thy mystery, O Cross, for which thou wast raised up. Indeed thou wast raised up over the world to make steady that which was unsteady. One part of thee rises into the heavens, to point to the Word on High; another part stretches to right and left, to put to flight the fearsome power of the adversary and to gather the world together in unity; and one part of thee is planted in the earth, so that thou mayest unite the things that are on the earth and the things in hell with the things that are in heaven.[56]

This is precisely what the Esagil does in *Enuma Elish*, as does Baal's Mount Zaphon and Zion in the Psalms, they are the *axis mundi* both vertically and horizontally. Is our ability to trace elements like this back to "pagan" myths a challenge to faith, or is it, as Coventry Patmore found it, profoundly inspiring?[57]

One recent author is so astonished by the close parallels of biblical tradition and ancient Near Eastern myth that he posits that demons must have deliberately set up counterfeit religions ahead of time in the regions surrounding ancient Israel to more easily lead people astray from the truth.[58] Even if we do not go that far, is the threat to faith valid unless we introduce some such concept like the ability of the biblical tradents to make "critical appropriation" of the religious ideas around them? Must one choose exclusively between either evolutionary genealogies of Israelite religion that involve the adaptation of myths or critical appropriation interpretation?

I am wary of making the viability of inspiration come down to such an absolutely definitive decision regarding myths.[59] We would be forced to make the biblical writers, redactors, and editors somehow able to transcend their various cultures in truly uncanny ways. A human being is a human being. As Aquinas says in discussing inspiration, "For God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature."[60] The human writer of Scripture, as the instrumental cause, can only be inspired by God as a human

54. C. S. Lewis, "The Anthropological Approach," in *English and Medieval Studies: Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London: George Allen & Unwil, 1962), 220, 224.
55. Jean Daniélou, *Christ and Us* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 68; Lewis, "The Anthropological Approach," 226.
56. Daniélou, *Christ and Us*, 141.
57. Coventry Patmore, *Principle in Art, Religio Poetae, and Other Essays* (London: Duckworth, 1913), 234–35.
58. Jeffrey Jay Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 179.
59. Owen Barfield, "The Concept of Revelation," *Anglican Theological Review* 63 (1981): 235, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/xlvii.2.297.
60. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 1, a. 9.

being, complete with unique thoughts, free will, imagination, biases, and concerns—in short, as an author. We do not have to make each biblical passage with ancient Near Eastern mythic allusions a "counter-myth." The Bible is bigger than this intellectual agenda and not primarily about being "against" what is in the ancient Near East.

But there is more. We must not merely excuse the Bible for using ancient Near Eastern myth; we must expect it to. The bizarre idea that demons inspired ancient Near Eastern religions to imitate the true faith in advance is worth contrasting with the ancient and widespread belief that God left witnesses to himself in all nations. The idea of *praeparatio evangelica* is adumbrated in the Bible itself, for example in Malachi: "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations" (Mal 1:11); or Paul in Athens, according to Luke, "Him whom you worship in ignorance, I now declare to you" (Acts 17:23). In other words, if there are resemblances between ancient Near Eastern myth and biblical texts that historically can be accounted for by evolution or borrowing, there can also be a theological account that in imperfect ways people have always been able to glimpse something of God's truth because God has let them do so. Moreover, the biblical tradents are not merely using the myths and idioms that were available around them to mediate the special revelation with which they were entrusted; rather, the nonbiblical myths are the pre-testament to the Old Testament or even the Old Testament of the Old Testament, without which the text as we have it would not exist.

Look at the dragon-slaying myth in the Hebrew Bible. We learn from Ugarit, from Enuma Elish, from Teshub and Tarhunt, that this myth is about stability, about security that can be placed in the storm god and, in those cultures, the king as his representative. Psalm 18 says it is Yahweh who

> Bent the sky and came down,
> Thick cloud beneath His feet.
> He mounted a cherub and flew,
> Gliding on the wings of the wind
> He made darkness His screen;
> Dark thunderheads, dense clouds of the sky
> Were His pavilion round about Him.
> Out of the brilliance before Him
> Hail and fiery coals pierced his clouds.
> Then the LORD thundered from heaven,
> The Most High gave forth His voice—
> Hail and fiery coals.
> He let fly his shafts and scattered them;
> He discharged lightning and routed them.

Israel does not believe in dragons, and I do not think Canaanites did, either. But Israel does claim that whatever Canaanites mean when they say "Baal slew the Sea," is true of Yahweh, not Baal. Indeed, what was an incomparably difficult victory for Baal—as it was for Tarhunt, Teshub, and Indra—was child's play for Yahweh, as Psalm 77 says:

> The waters saw you, O God,
> The waters saw You and were convulsed;
> The very deep quaked as well.
> Clouds streamed water;
> The heavens rumbled;
> Your arrows flew about;
> Your thunder rumbled like wheels;
> Lightning lit up the world;
> The earth quaked and trembled.

Psalm 104 even turns Leviathan into God's pet—Yahweh's goldfish. The final chapters of Job do the same, all the while reminding the reader of Leviathan's monstrousness.[61]

This is not merely apologetic, however, responding to Canaanites. This is Israel's own myth, as much as it is Ugarit's. The Ugaritic *Chaoskampf* is not a creation myth at all, but Israel's certainly is, as Psalm 74 follows the smashing of dragons' heads with the creation of day and night, the sun and the seasons. Psalm 89 follows the ruling of the sea and crushing of Rahab with the establishment of the heavens and the north and south. The pilgrimage of the nations to Zion that follows the victory over the dragon in many psalms is likewise found in no other people's version of the myth. Israel makes the myth its own just as every other culture did, because it says something about God and the world.

Critical discourse analysis tells us we can get a start on what that something is by asking what experiential value the individual variables of the myth have. The most euphemistic or metaphorical variable here is the storm as divine metaphor. The city of God is a literal city. The nations are at least to some extent literal foreign nations. The storm was not, however, seen by Israel as a god. Yahweh may have been a storm god, but the storm was not divine. Nor are storm theophanies literally referred to here. The storm serves to say something about God. The other main metaphor is the defeat of the sea. Why God needs to be a storm, and why the sea needs to be defeated, will be explored in a moment. Certainly the "dragon" is a metaphor as well, but this does not mean that it is demythologized. It is a metaphor precisely because it communicates something *as a dragon*. The metaphor has not ossified, as it has in the "dragonfly" or

61. It is possible that examples such as these have a different *Sitz im Leben* from the more violent uses of the imagery. I am grateful to Christopher Freschette for this suggestion.

"snapdragon." Only as a visualized dragon with "crushable heads" does it serve as the psalmists intend.

Because dragons are a mainstay of folklore and mythology, literary critics and psychologists have been explaining them for a long time.[62] This has the value of opening to us the burgeoning field of "Monster Theory."[63] Why, after all, is it a serpent/dragon in Eden, instead of, say, an owl? In the ancient Near East, why does Baal not slay a bear? Or Teshub a giant eagle?

A bear or an eagle will not do because as Jeffrey Cohen writes, "the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us."[64] And not merely difference, the dragon is a snake with legs and often wings, "when what most distinguishes snakes from other reptiles is that they are legless, when no reptile has feathered wings."[65] The "Mary Douglas" answer would be that dragon is a hybrid, a taxonomic anomaly.[66] But Dan Sperber opines, "If it were just a matter of setting apart natural hybrids and monsters, why create artificial ones, those fantastic animals which complicate the task further?"[67] Monsters are more than hybrids. They are not anomalies "generated by the taxonomy but by a contradiction in discourse."[68] "They evoke a worse world, that of anomaly."[69] The dragon is, as we see throughout the ancient world, chaos personified.[70] The dragon is everything that is evil, everything that is disordered, and thus, everything opposed to God. As T. S. Eliot writes of Charles Williams's evil, the dragon is not about

62. Lutz Röhrich, "Drache, Drachenkampf, Drachentoter," in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens: Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, ed. Kurt Ranke et al. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 3.788; Barbara Stamer and Vera Zingsem, eds., *Schlangenfrau und Chaosdrache in Märchen, Mythos und Kunst Schlangen- und Drachensymbolik im Kulturvergleich* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 2001), 234; on Freud, Jung, and dragons, see Friedrich Schröder, *Die weiße Schlange: Annäherung an ein Ursymbol in einem Märchen der Brüder Grimm; eine tiefenpsychologische Interpretation* (Stuttgart: Opus Magnum, 2013), 13–15; Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie: Selections from Gaston Bachelard*, rev. edn. (Dallas: Spring, 1987), 17.

63. Not all of which is helpful; the common-sense explanations of Cary Morrison, "Creature Conflict: Man, Monster and the Metaphor of Intractable Social Conflict," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Paul Yoder and Peter M. Kreuter, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary, 2004), 167–75, are all rather simplistic.

64. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7.

65. Dan Sperber, "Why Are Perfect Animals, Hybrids, and Monsters Food for Symbolic Thought?" *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 146, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006896x00170.

66. Sperber, "Why Are Perfect Animals," 147.

67. Sperber, "Why Are Perfect Animals," 150.

68. Sperber, "Why Are Perfect Animals," 154.

69. Sperber, "Why Are Perfect Animals," 167.

70. David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mystical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 21; Schröder, *Die weiße Schlange*, 22; Uwe Steffen, *Drachenkampf: Der Mythos Vom Bösen* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1984), 35.

imaging "the Evil of conventional morality and ordinary manifestations by which we recognize it, but with the essence of Evil; it is therefore Evil which has no power to attract us, for we see it as the repulsive thing it is … from which we recoil."[71] The author of Revelation is not an eisegete when he claims Eden's serpent is Satan and at the same time Leviathan with seven heads.[72]

Kierkegaard, too, equated the Eden serpent with the force of the uncanny, as the Russian existentialist Lev Shestov paraphrased, "the fearful anxiety experienced by the man who feels that he must run as quickly as possible but that a mysterious force paralyzes him and prevents him from making the slightest movement!"[73]

Our dragon, however, is also the sea. The sea is a perfect case of what Ernst Jentsch defined magisterially in 1906 as the "uncanny." To the human observer, the writhing and convulsing surface of the sea appears living, a fantastic malevolent beast.[74] In addition, even inanimate the sea is chaotic, dis-ordered.[75] As W. H. Auden wrote, "The Sea or the great waters, that is, are the symbol for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance which became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it."[76] Its sound breaks down the sense of hearing, one of Jentsch's prime causative mechanisms. Finally, the sea constitutes a barrier, a dangerous frontier few can pass. The fifth-century BCE Andocides wrote, "For when is man in greater peril than on a winter sea-passage?" (*On the Mysteries*). The combination of these aspects—uncanny monster, chaos, and boundary—kept the sea a metaphor for danger even in the speeches of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Disraeli, and Booker T. Washington.[77]

This is why God must slay not only the dragon but what W. H. Auden called

> The sea with melancholy war
> Moatest about our castled shore;
> His world-wide elemental moan
> Girdeth our lives with tragic zone.[78]

71. T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," in *All Hallows' Eve*, 1st Eerdmans ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), xvi.
72. Steffen, *Drachenkampf*, 35; thus, Jung was also correct; Schröder, *Die weiße Schlange*, 15.
73. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 256–57.
74. Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2 (1997): 13, https://doi.org/10.1080/09697259708571910.
75. Steffen, *Drachenkampf*, 16.
76. W. H. Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood: Or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1950), 18; Michael Osborn, "The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea in Rhetoric and Poetic," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1997): 348; Steffen, *Drachenkampf*, 35, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637709383395.
77. Osborn, "The Evolution of the Archetypal Sea in Rhetoric and Poetic," 354.
78. Robert Bridges, "Ode to Music," 4.1.

The foe of God is the sea throughout the Bible, from the psalms through Habakkuk 3 to Jesus walking on the water.[79] In fact, writes Christopher Connery, "Although many oral and textual traditions around the world contain a sea mythos … the overpowering sense of elementalism is rarely as strong as in the set of stories and practices that shaped and comprised the Yahweh version."[80] It is no wonder that in the New Jerusalem there is no sea.

As Stephen Asma points out, nearly the same feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and tininess occur "whether you are confronting God in a religious ecstasy or confronting the onslaught of unstoppable monsters."[81] This is why the dragon-slayer is not merely God, but God as a storm—the storm of King Lear:

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
> You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
> Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world.

This quality, which is what is meant by God hurling thunderbolts, is what Rudolf Otto dubbed the "numinous."[82] The numinous *mysterium tremendum* "cannot be expressed verbally" but it can "be suggested indirectly" through mythic images.[83] The storm is one of the most powerful of such images, precisely because unlike the dragon the storm is something we have all experienced.

This kind of experience Jean-Luc Marion calls "saturated, where the excess of intuition over signification censures the constitution of an object and, more radically, the visibility of a unified and defined spectacle."[84] This "excess of intuition is accomplished in the form of stupor, or even of the terror that the incomprehensibility

79. Christopher Connery, "There Was No More Sea: The Supersession of the Ocean, from the Bible to Cyberspace," *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006): 499, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2005.10.005.
80. Connery, "There Was No More Sea," 500.
81. Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 192; this was John Oman's criticism of Rudolf Otto; Owen Ware, "Rudolph Otto's Idea of the Holy: A Reappraisal," *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007): 52, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468–2265.2007.00305.x.
82. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 7; Ware, "Rudolph Otto's Idea of the Holy," 49.
83. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10, 62.
84. Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 119.

resulting from excess imposes on us."[85] Marion quotes John Chrysostom's description in *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* (3.214) of God's incomprehensibility and the accompanying "holy terror" and "soul shuddering." God is wholly other, and yet this can only be captured by reference to an experience—the storm—rather than by stating that impossibility.[86]

Redemptive Violence or Theodicy

A word should be said about a growing trend among exegetes and theologians to push back against the dragon-slaying imagery of the texts I have examined. One scholar writes that this sort of imagery is a matrix of domination: "It must produce the monsters that at once justify its control and mock its mastery."[87] This entire study of mine must serve only to perpetuate the myth of redemptive violence René Girard and Walter Wink warned us about.[88] Yes, we may allow the violent mythical imagery when employed by oppressed peoples of the developing world, but we Westerners ought to abandon it.[89] For such reasons, multiple scholars reject these dragon-slaying texts altogether. Others instead focus on the metaphorical nature of all this violence; after all, the sword from Christ's mouth in Rev 19:21 is clearly the Scriptures, not a sword.[90]

One recent author, however, argues that this is no way out. Metaphors, she writes, do not make the violent imagery "magically transmuted into something nonviolent."[91] Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson so famously between 1980 and 1996, tells us metaphor understands one thing in terms of another. So even the mouth-sword "invites the reader to think of Christ's word in terms of a conquering warrior and to reason in these terms."[92]

But perhaps we should worry about relying on a theory of metaphor that is 30 years old, ignoring among other things anything written by Lakoff or Johnson in the past twenty years.[93] My interlocutor is right: "Read as conceptual metaphors, the violent

85. Marion, *In Excess*, 161.
86. Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays: A Supplement to "The Idea of the Holy"*, trans. Brian Lunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), 92.
87. Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 160.
88. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Michael Metteer and Stephen Bann (London: Continuum, 2003), 180–81; Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 42–60.
89. Susan E. Hylen, "Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011): 793.
90. Hylen, "Metaphor Matters," 778.
91. Hylen, "Metaphor Matters," 780.
92. Hylen, "Metaphor Matters," 784.
93. Olga Isabel Diez Velasco, "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Image-Schemas: An Analysis of Conceptual Interaction Patterns," *Journal of English Studies* 3 (2001): 48, https://doi.org/10.18172/jes.69. The San Diego School never accepted the centrality of metaphor to thought, preferring to investigate the interface between thought and grammar in every area of linguistics; Philip D. King, *Surrounded by Bitterness: Image Schemas and Metaphors for Conceptualizing Distress in Classical Hebrew* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 38.

imagery of Revelation will not go away." I will argue below that in some sense it ought not go away, but part of the problem here is that linguists and literary scholars have moved far beyond Conceptual Metaphor Theory. A vast majority of our metaphors do not draw on source domains in our cognition.[94] To pass by the skin of one's teeth involves no base metaphor about teeth. Nowadays linguistics understand metaphors through schematic networks or image schemas.[95] Image schemas are condensed descriptions of perceived experience mapped onto conceptual structure.[96] In this view, "a straight answer" or "say it straight to my face" do not derive from some base cognitive metaphor (e.g., WORDS FOLLOW LINES) but from a CONTAINMENT schema, wherein "straight is an image schema as it represents a recurrent pattern of action, perception, and conception."[97]

Violence in these myths is part of a schema wherein supra-human will is opposed to God's. The rhetoric of violence helps us articulate the size of the problem. The evil that requires the dragon-slayer is not merely in Syria and Yemen. As Anathea Portier-Young writes, "We live today in a world more deeply traumatized and terrorized than many of us dare to imagine,"[98] and "Apocalyptic is a necessary … form opening into injustice and terror."[99]

In the post-twentieth-century return to theological interpretation, biblical scholars have forgotten how to read the biblical text initially like any other text. Having no experience over the preceding decades with hermeneutics, the biblical scholar has forgotten the demand of all criticism "to subdue his tenderly cherished prejudices, silence his garrulous self-important opinions,"[100] as David Cecil wrote. "The anachronistic fallacy" is reproaching past societies society for not sharing our values,[101] and the conscientious literary scholar avoids it. So, too, the post-Whiggish historian does not judge historical actors and the times in which they found themselves by present cultural taboos.[102] "Ethical historians attempt continuously to detect the slightest

94. King, *Surrounded by Bitterness*, 48; Todd Oakley, "Image Schemas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 214.
95. King, *Surrounded by Bitterness*, 42.
96. Oakley, "Image Schemas," 215.
97. Oakley, "Image Schemas," 215. See also Diez Velasco, "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Image-Schemas," 52–53.
98. Anathea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 398.
99. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 400.
100. David Cecil, *Reading as One of the Fine Arts: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 28 May 1949* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), 11.
101. Richard D. Altick and John J. Fenstermaker, *The Art of Literary Research*, 4th edn. (New York: Norton, 1993), 153.
102. Meg Gorzycki, Linda Elder, and Richard Paul, *Historical Thinking: Bringing Critical Thinking Explicitly into the Heart of Historical Study* (Tomales: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2013), 5, 16, 24; Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 90. That is not to say we preach pure relativism. Empathy with a historical actor does not lead to justification; Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* 96–97.

tremor of bias in their thinking," writes Meg Gorzycki.[103] Benno Landsberger taught Assyriologists to examine the past in its own *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*, without referring it to our own moral, ethical, or religious concepts.[104] The archaeologist, too, adopts a cultural relativism whereby different cultural systems can make as much sense as our own and we understand them on their own terms, not using, in this case, twenty-first-century morality to interpret what ancient Israelites are doing.[105]

As Portier-Young writes, drawing on Johann Baptist Metz and David Tracy, cosmic conflict imagery is a deep engagement with human suffering.[106] This is because answers to deep suffering, to the theodicy question of how an all-powerful, all-good God can permit suffering, generally fall into one of two approaches, both of which are compromises on God's powers.[107] One approach is to compromise on the goodness of God. Such a tactic is behind the canard, "It must be God's will somehow" for so-and-so to die young tragically, for Ebola to ravage Sierra Leone, and so forth. The other frequently used method is to compromise on God's omnipotence. That is, "foregoing some traditional ideas of God being in control of reality in the meantime in favor of the idea that forces of chaos (pictured in myth as [the dragon] and the sea) sometimes rage and that God battles against them."[108] Or perhaps, as Evelyn Underhill wrote, "We see in this muddled world a constant struggle for Truth, Goodness, Perfection; and all those who give themselves to that struggle—the struggle for the redemption of

103. Gorzycki, Elder, and Paul, *Historical Thinking*, 22.

104. Benno Landsberger, "Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt," *Islamica* 2 (1926): 355–72.

105. The classic treatment of cultural relativity in anthropology is Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935), but as Clifford Geertz points out, the policy goes back to Herodotus (1859–61); Clifford Geertz, "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 86 (1984): 264, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1984.86.2.02a00030. See now Fred W. Voget, *A History of Ethnology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975) and Mathias Gutmann, "Human Cultures' Natures: Critical Considerations and Some Perspectives of Culturalist Anthropology," in *On Human Nature: Anthropological, Biological, and Philosophical Foundations*, ed. A. Grunwald, M. Gutmann, and E. M. Neumann-Held (New York: Springer, 2013), 195–240. Cultural relativism is "not the moral argument that any culture or custom is as good as any other … [but] the provisional suspension of one's own judgments"; Marshall Sahlins, *Waiting for Foucault, Still*, 3rd edn. (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2002), 46. We don't judge the Yanamamo for being violent, so why should we judge Daniel?

106. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 399; Johannes Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, ed. and trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 83; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 265–66.

107. There is, of course, another Christian approach to the problem of human suffering, that it enables the sufferer to partake in the Divine life as it renders them Christlike; see especially Carol Barrett Ford, "Theosis and the Problem of Human Suffering," *Theology and Ministry* 3.2 (2014): 1, 10–13.

108. Andrew R. Angel, *Playing with Dragons: Living with Suffering and God* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 27.

the world from greed, cruelty, injustice, selfish desire and their results—find themselves supported and reinforced by a spiritual power which enhances life, strengthens will, and purifies character."[109]

While this admittedly limits God's power, as Greg Boyd writes, "It certainly seems less scary than living in a cosmos that is being coercively run by a supreme being who secretly wills the torture of little girls."[110] Such a supreme being of "caprice … would have been emphatically rejected by the religious men of the Old Covenant."[111]

This is why the Bible does not always reduce Leviathan to a guppy, as it does in Psalm 104 and in the book of Job. The dragon is defeated by God far more often than it is a tame pet. The divine warrior is meant to be on the ropes. We see repeatedly that the initial defeat of the storm god is an integral part of the ancient Near Eastern myth. While the dragon-slaying is easier for Yahweh than it is for any other god other than Marduk—much easier than for Indra, Tarḫunt, Teshub, or Baal—this is only partially correct. Where the mythemes are isolated, it is true, but taking the biblical canon as a whole, Genesis 3 is an initial victory for the dragon. More importantly, following the canonical gun barrel further, the named dragon-slayer of the New Testament, Christ, is not only temporarily incapacitated but actually killed. The sea-trampling dragon-slayer dies.[112] Unless we are to be Nestorian about it, Yahweh dies. The incarnation in all of its condescension and sacramentality demands that Leviathan not always be a fish.

And yet, that is not the end of the story. The dragon is *always* ultimately slain. We have not one myth from any culture where the dragon is unscathed. Moreover, only in the biblical tradition do we get any myths where the dragon is reduced to a pet fish.[113] Ultimately, the numinous God is omnipotent.

In Psalm 74, the dragon-slaying is past. In Isaiah 27, it is future. In Psalm 77, it was the Exodus Sea crossing. These are all impingements of the same mythic event, the dragon-slaying, into our world. None of this is "historicized myth." The dragon-slaying happens at all of these moments, as well as in Jesus walking on water. In this logic,

109. Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1984), 110–11.
110. Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 292.
111. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 18.
112. Of the other storm gods, only Baal is comparable.
113. Delightfully combining both images, the twelfth-century Hortus Deliciarum of Herrad of Landsberg contains an image of God fishing with a line made of the genealogy of Christ, using Jesus as bait, in order to catch Leviathan; Herrad of Landsberg, *Hortus Deliciarum = Garden of Delights*, ed. and trans. Aristide D. Caratzas (New Rochelle: Caratzas Bros., 1977), 86, pl. 24. The only possible parallel is Marduk's association with the Mušḫuššu dragon, which dates at least from the twenty-fifth century and appears almost as his pet; F. A. M. Wiggermann, "Transtigridian Snake Gods," in *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations*, ed. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Geller (Groningen: Styx, 1997), 37; contra F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts* (Groningen: Styx & PP, 1992), 162, 169, this creature is not related to the Enuma Elish battle. I am grateful to Hans-Ulrich Steymans for pointing out the Marduk example.

no event happens for the first or last time; everything was foretold and foretells.[114] As Tzvetan Todorov writes, "Retrospective future, re-established at the moment a prediction is fulfilled, is completed by the prospective future. … The whole present was already contained in the past, the past remains in the present."[115] Even events that follow a logic in their narrative contexts, like the crossing of the Red Sea or stilling of the Sea of Galilee, are signs of something else.[116]

In this case, the readers do not care "what happens next." The outcome of the *Chaoskampf* is already known before one gets to Daniel or Revelation. The questions readers do ask is, "What is the dragon this time?"[117] The biblical narrative is not a narrative of *Heilsgeschichte* but a narrative of substitution—Antiochus Epiphanes for Leviathan in Daniel, or even Pompey for Leviathan in the *Psalms of Solomon*.

This, too has theological implications. Andy Angel explains:

> No two dragons are the same. Some are dead, some are subdued, and others are very much alive and kicking. We are invited not only to sketch but also to color in our own dragons so that they reflect our own sufferings and challenges. The myth can be molded to fit our realities and yet the expectation is that the story will finally break the mold when suffering is past.[118]

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114. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 132–33.
115. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 134; Austin Farrer, "Can Myth Be Fact? (1945)," in *Interpretation and Belief*, ed. Charles C. Conti (London: SPCK, 1976), 172 describing Daniel 7.
116. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 135.
117. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 135; Angel, *Playing with Dragons*, 99.
118. Angel, *Playing with Dragons*, 35–36.